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Baby Steps in Prairie Grass

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It may be less amazing than it sounds, but the facts, as I see them, read quite clearly. It took me 31 years of Iowa life to take my first steps on real native prairie, the kind my great-grandparents must have set upon when they arrived in northwest Iowa in the 1880s. Thirty-one years. Seems like a lifetime.

But then, real native prairie goes at a premium in this corner of the state. Out here, one might stumble on a few sloped patches of original grasses along the bluffs of the Big Sioux River, but for decades already the land—the arable land, as some might say—has been drawn-and-quartered by endless row crops that, come summer, turn the whole region into a

Breaking prairie sod in Sioux County

gargantuan garden. People who can't or won't see beauty in interminable echelons of corn tassels should have their eyes checked. This Iowa prairie, no matter how you dress it, is beautiful ground. But having now taken baby steps in native prairie, I can't help but think how strange and sad it is that it took me 30-plus years to do it.

I'm told that, topographically speaking, the state of Iowa has the most fully transformed landscape of any of the fifty states. What was once tall-grass prairie, especially out here in the northwest corner, has been entirely transformed by rituals of corn and soybeans. What was here so many years ago was a forever grassland, a yawning landscape that grabbed Lewis and Clark's breath the moment they set their eyes on its limitlessness. What was here so many years ago was tallgrass prairie that, come September, could, on its own, hide a six-foot man, the way hybrid corn can today. What was here so many years ago used to shivver in the wind, like cat fur. What was here, once blossomed kaleidoscopically all summer. What was here used to blaze, literally.

Photo courtesy of *Siouxland: A History of Sioux County, Iowa*

Quite simply, what was here is gone, maybe forever, and gone more extensively, if I can say it that way, than the original landscapes of 49 other states. That's why, I guess, it shouldn't be surprising that it took me better than thirty years to take my first steps on native prairie.

Not long ago, I took some visitors on a little bus trip around Siouxland, a literary crawl of sorts, showing some out-of-staters some of the haunts of some of northwest Iowa's most beloved Dutch writers—Frederic Manfred, Stanley Wiersma, and Jim Heynen. I told those tourists what I've been told: not only that Iowa's prairie is the most altered landscape of any state in the union, but that Sioux County, where I live, is the most altered county of any of Iowa's 99. Later, I couldn't help but think that if I'd been taking those folks on a similar little jaunt around the area fifty years ago—a group of fine Calvinist folks, most of them Dutch-American—I would have said what I did with a whole different spin, with a brimful of ethnic and even spiritual pride.

After all, the Dutch, of whom I am one, dyked and tiled and drained the sea itself to make productive farmland. My people came from Holland to northwest Iowa with a penchant for subduing the earth. "Look at this now—how these good Dutch farmers have taken this beautiful land and brought forth food for their families!" I have no doubt I would have been singing a song of triumph.

But not so today. Not really.

Today, for better or for worse, the recitation of the facts of the altered landscape comes out a bit more sour, even out here, where the descendents of Dutch immigrants likely manage their land as lovingly as any in the state. Even here the story of the altered landscape sounds more dirge than paean because it's difficult to put a positive spin on the truth of what's here: "Isn't it wonderful how there's nothing left of what was?"

But let me describe those baby steps I took just last week.

Dawn came bewitchingly, thick August haze running like some mystical, gossamer river through the land's low spots, masking the brilliance of the dawn, casting the whole broad setting in darkening layers of mellow gold. I stopped the car at the side of the gravel road, took out the camera, and looked over a 140-acre chunk of land called Steele Prairie State Preserve, one of Iowa's largest remnant tallgrass prairies outside of the Loess Hills, a place lovingly maintained in nearby Cherokee County.

"Looks like a weed patch," some might say.

Maybe they're not wrong. There are no parallel tassels, no shimmering bean leaves. The place doesn't look at all managed. It's wild, the sedge meadow and marsh vegetation growing hither and yon as if answering to no one. It looks like a classroom out of control, a chaotic caucus of plant life. I hate to say it, but a lot of us wouldn't find Steele Prairie Preserve all that attractive.

But those first steps into the patch of grass made me aware that if this wasn't some kind of hallowed ground, it was at least a whole different walk than anything available on ordinary Iowa farmland. In August, the grasses on native prairie aren't at all spindly or scattered, even though the compass plants rise like lanky teenage girls above the class beneath them.

In five steps—no more—my shoes were wet, pants legs soaked. Fifty feet into the Steele Preserve and I had a whole new vision of those prairie schooners moving west. Those folks weren't walking on concrete; they were slugging through thick prairie grasses, taking their own baby steps on bumpy land that hadn't been plowed and disked, planted and harrowed, but was, instead, a natural mess. Today, as then, anthills abound. You can turn an ankle in a

minute. I'd be lying if I'd say the footing is treacherous; let's just put it this way: the earth is not at all subdued.

Even more surprising, at least to me, was the land's generous coat, so much thicker, so much heavier than I would have dreamed. I had to slog my way through its shagginess. I had absolutely no idea Iowa's natural bounty of prairie grasses was so flax-like. In a matter of speaking, the place was a knee-high jungle. For most of those 31 years, I've thought of Iowa land as bountifully productive, unending August greens; but let's face it: much of the year the land is flat, harvested, and, well, naked.

Native prairie is not naked. It's flora is fur-like, that thick. One can only imagine what decades—centuries, in fact—of that kind of profuse growth offered the earth nutritionally. Conversely, one can only imagine what decades—and now a century—of its absence has taken away. Standing knee-deep and more in natural prairie, I couldn't help but think of what has been stripped off. I've lived here long enough to know that this is no country in which to run naked.

I didn't grow up on a farm, and I've never lived on one. I can't rhapsodize about June afternoons pulling a rotary hoe across open fields. I don't know the earth out here in the same way my father-in-law came to know it through seventy years of seed-time and harvest. And I know that his work on this ground has given me the right, in many ways, to see the world in the way I do today, even to say what I'm saying now. Only because he's worked it as hard as he has, can a teacher in a college his harvests helped pay for stroll leisurely through the neighborhood's only existent patch of native prairie. Fifty years ago, if I lived here, that Saturday morning in August, I would have been milking.

But I couldn't help think, as I walked, totally alone through that museum, that out here in the bountiful northwest corner of Iowa we'd all be better off if somehow we were capable of giving something back to what was, of reinvesting in this area by divesting ourselves of some of what we've done. I couldn't help wonder whether the quality of all our lives wouldn't be greatly enhanced if Sioux County, Iowa, couldn't find the wherewithal somehow to give up, say, four sections of this blessed land that has given so blessed much to bless all of us. If our children could, on some Saturday morning in August, take a walk in the thick, restored prairie and look over, say, two miles of the great ocean of grass that once lay here, wouldn't they—wouldn't all of us—treasure more of what we have? Wouldn't a restored piece of land like that help all the descendents of those hard-working Calvinists see their Maker more vividly?

Maybe not.

But wouldn't it be great if, in this great expanse of rolling prairie in a faraway corner of Iowa, we'd all just try a few baby steps towards a future that more fully remembers—and honors—what was?